



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

BBC NI: Briefing from Director

28 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Johnston BBC Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome Peter Johnston, director of BBC Northern Ireland, who is no stranger to our Committee. The session is being recorded by Hansard. I invite you to make an opening statement, after which colleagues will ask some questions.

Mr Peter Johnston (BBC Northern Ireland): Thank you very much. Obviously, we welcome the interest that you continue to show in our work. The last time that I was here, it was to discuss the savings plans, on which I will provide an update and answer questions. The conversation at that meeting ranged quite widely after that and included the general health of the creative industries. I have another role as the chairman of Creative Skillset Northern Ireland, although my term in that role is nearly up, with this being my last month. The skills agenda is obviously part of the brief, so I am happy to talk about that too if it would be useful to do so.

I have provided a paper that has some key facts and some of the key issues and developments since we last met. I am very happy to answer any questions on that, and I hope that it is useful. I will highlight some of the main developments or challenges since I was last here.

Firstly, the savings plan, as discussed, was the subject of most of the discussion last time, with the concerns about how it would be achieved. Obviously, that was based on the savings targets faced by the whole BBC off the back of the licence fee settlement. It has not been easy: these things never are, as you will be aware, and as many industries and businesses have experienced in these more difficult economic times. All the same, we have made good progress. We have saved just under £5 million on 2016-17 prices over the period. We made a number of changes to the output to partly underpin that, such as a review of our politics output, which led to the launch of 'The View' and a

coming together of the teams. There were range of other savings made across a number of other areas and departments, as was discussed last time.

In that period, 34 voluntary redundancies have been achieved, which enabled those savings to be made. It has been a tough couple of years, because a lot of our savings were made in the front-loaded period that is ending. There are still some savings targets ahead, but they are more modest and, as I said last time, are more targeted on infrastructure, technology and ways of saving money that do not affect teams and/or content. That is the position we are in, and we are now going through a budget process to agree the final period of the plan.

A key concern from the Committee last time was about the impact the savings targets would have on content and quality. I am happy to hear views and comments on that. We have had a very rich range of events since we last met, from the Titanic season, which was a big success, through to, more recently, the City of Culture year, on which we provided a wide range of programmes. There has also been the Irish Open, the G8 and the Olympics. So, a lot has been going on, and we have had some very good audience feedback on the significance of those events and seasons.

In terms of local output, if you look at the Ofcom findings you will see that we have a lot of news junkies and consume more news than anywhere else on all platforms. We continue to benefit from that, particularly Radio Ulster, which is one of the most used news sources when compared with other radio stations in other parts of the UK.

We have a strong continuing interest in local programming. You have reflected on that in various discussions. There is an appetite for that programming here. We regularly look at the top 10 or 20 programmes on BBC1 and BBC2. In the month of October, eight of the top 10 were local programmes, ranging from coverage of Ulster Rugby to some documentaries to an Irish language programme. So, there was a real mix.

Obviously, since we last met, we have benefited further from the Irish language fund and the Ulster-Scots broadcast fund. The Irish language fund continues to work very well. We have had a wide range of programmes from dramas like 'Scúp' to a real mix of documentaries, particularly about the City of Culture year. More recently, we had 'It's a Blas' in which William Crawley learned Irish. That won an award at the Aisling Awards. The Ulster Scots fund has provided for a range of documentary programming. 'An Independent People', which was about the history of Presbyterianism, was given one of our highest quality scores for programmes we have made in the past five or so years.

We have launched 'True North', which is a new series of documentaries that seeks to look at very different aspects of contemporary life. It has been a very wide range of programmes from 'A Summer on Rathlin' to 'The Miraculous Tales of Mickey McGuigan', which — I do not know whether any of you saw that — was a fascinating insight into rural life. That series is intended to be a very diverse mix of programmes. As usual, we have had quite a lot of history programming.

Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle continue to be an important part of the mix for us, and there has been some success for the two stations, particularly at the Irish equivalent of the Sony Radio Awards — the PPI Radio Awards. At the last meeting, members mentioned Sarah Brett. She won the title of News Broadcaster of the Year at that awards ceremony, and that was fantastic. One of the things that we have been concentrating on in radio is providing new opportunities for presenters across a wide range of outputs, and that is one example.

There is always a focus on network production. When we were last here, I flagged up the fact that we had just had 'Hidden' filming in Northern Ireland, and I said that our ambition was to have a returning drama filmed in Northern Ireland. We have achieved that with 'The Fall', which has been a huge success in the UK as well as here and across the world. In fact, it is being broadcast in America and other places. That is returning in January for another series. We have just finished filming 'Line of Duty', and, added to that, we have 'Blandings', which was filmed in Fermanagh, and 'Dani's Castle', which is for CBBC. A couple of the First World War dramas for the BBC were partially filmed here as well, including 'The Wipers Times', which has already gone out.

Current affairs are a continuing focus and strength for us in network terms. We make between 10 and 12 'Panorama' programmes a year. This year, we won a BAFTA for a programme in the 'This World' series that Darragh MacIntyre made about the Catholic Church. There are a range of other in-house programmes, such as 'Sunday Morning Live'.

In the indie sector, we have had a mix across different genres. It has been a more sporadic story — one that I know you would like to talk about — in which we have some new initiatives in place that we will talk about in a second. I have a few other things to highlight, and then I will flag up what is ahead.

With regard to digital distribution, when we last met, we were just facing digital switch over, which, thankfully, happened successfully for all concerned. We now have BBC Northern Ireland HD on air, and there is huge change ongoing with other digital delivery platforms, such as iPlayer and tablets, which, in Northern Ireland, according to Ofcom's research, have gone from 9% uptake to 29% in one year. So, those methods are to the fore for us.

We have had a wide range of partnerships, from the traditional ones, such as with the Ulster Orchestra, to new ones, particularly working with the industry and Skillset and others to have the trainee scheme, which I flagged the last time. The figures are slightly wrong in the report: we had 15 trainees in year one and 10 in year two coming through that scheme. From the first year of it, all the people who have gone through it are now working in the industry, and that is fantastic to see.

The City of Culture has been a huge focus for us this year. I counted it up, and we have had about 50 individual projects across TV, radio, online, network and local, and that has ranged from the 'Pure Culture' radio show on Radio Foyle through to huge events such as 'One Big Weekend', which was a huge success. On Monday night, you will see a documentary that we made that followed the fleadh while it was in the City of Culture.

For the BBC as a whole, it has been a challenging period since we last met. We have a new director general, Tony Hall, who took up post earlier this year. Hopefully, you will have had a chance to look at the priorities that he has set out, looking ahead. That is a forerunner to the charter review process, which you highlighted in your opening remarks. It will soon be upon us, as the charter runs out at the end of 2016. That is a UK Government process, which we feed into via the BBC Trust and directly. A process will be put in place, and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee at Westminster has been putting in place the process that it intends to use to inform that debate and discussion.

Looking ahead, other priorities or issues that I will flag include the continuing financial challenges. Those do not seem to be as severe as they were when I last saw you. That is always dictated by the licence fee settlement. So far, we have managed to hold on well to sports rights. That was a concern the last time. There is a reasonably rich mix there, and we are continuing to do that. With regard to capital spend, some of you will probably know that we are looking at what our needs will be for the next four to five years and beyond. We need £20 million of new investment. We are looking at options including new buildings and moves. This is likely to be a longer term project but an important one.

With regard to the network challenge, we have had some good programmes from the indie sector, including 'Dig WW2' and 'Secret Fortune', which were delivered by our local independent companies. Getting the sustainability of that right is important, and we have put in place some new initiatives that I am happy to answer questions on, and I know that you have some questions on that.

There are the continuing challenges of digital, the archive and people. As we said the last time, we rely on our staff and the various companies and freelancers that we work with, and ensuring that they remain motivated, clear and skilled is an important part of our initiative, as we approach our 90th anniversary in 2014. The most important thing of all is great programmes for the audience. We have some really interesting things to come up in that regard. One that I will highlight is 'Five Fables', which is a really interesting project. It is from the work of an ancient Scots poet called Henryson. It was translated by Seamus Heaney before he tragically died. It is voiced by Billy Connolly and animated by Flickerpix. You will be familiar with some of its work; it is one of the really talented local companies. The music is by Barry Douglas. It is an amazing example of a very rich cultural programme that I hope will have a very wide appeal. That is the sort of thing that we need to have, looking ahead, in terms of ambition.

There are many challenges, not least the financial as well as the digital and the network and making sure that we continue to build on our strengths. There is also some important output as well. I am very happy to answer your questions. I hope that has been useful.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Peter, for your presentation and also for your written briefing in advance of the meeting. You will be aware that, earlier in the week, a debate on broadcasting powers divided the House. It was to seek the potential for transferring broadcasting powers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(DCAL) and for the funds of the Irish language broadcast fund and the Ulster-Scots broadcast fund to be transferred and mainstreamed. Do you have any comment on that?

Mr Johnston: It is difficult for me to say a lot because that is, of course, a political matter and not a matter for the BBC. It is a matter between Westminster and Stormont. I can say that it is a very important topic and is particularly important and relevant to us and the wider broadcasting sector. My observations are from understanding the issues involved, and I would flag three themes that need to be considered in making a decision on that subject.

The first issue is the regulatory and structural nature of broadcasting, because, unlike some industries, businesses or activities, broadcasting does not observe geographical boundaries, so there are all sorts of interesting and complex issues around rights, broadcasting footprints, regulatory regimes and those kinds of things.

Secondly, finance is an important factor in the mix. What is the economic model and how does that work? The Ofcom report will tell you that we in Northern Ireland currently benefit from having three times the UK average spend per head on local programming, but that is because of our population size and the relatively rich mix of programmes that we have. From my point of view, it is about protecting the range and diversity of local programming and the financial aspects around that. At the same time, audiences benefit from £3 billion worth of BBC content, for example, that cuts across a range of programmes that are important to people, whether that is soaps such as 'Eastenders', natural history programmes or big sporting occasions such as the Six Nations.

Finally, there is the issue of the structure of it all. It is very important to us to ensure that independence for journalistic impartiality is maintained and managed. Well-worn structures have been in place for that for many years. They have evolved and continue to evolve, and they should evolve. The key questions, again, are about how that would be formed.

From my point of view, those are a few of the key questions. I cannot and should not have an actual position on it. It is not for me to do. It is more for you guys, Westminster politicians and the wider public to have a view.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. One reason that you are here is to discuss the charter for 2016. The Minister said:

"The BBC charter will be renewed soon. The last time that it was renewed, no one here had any say over the commitments that the BBC made to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It all took place behind closed doors" — [Official Report, Vol 89, No 7, p58, col 2].

How can we ensure that that does not happen again or that that perception is not there?

Mr Johnston: To be clear, we are really talking about the licence fee settlement there, and that is what happened, in essence, behind closed doors in that way you have just described. The agreement of the charter, which led up to that, happened through a more normal process. The charter review process is UK Government-led, and my impression is that there is an intention for it to be a substantial process to which people and bodies such as yourselves will be encouraged to feed in. At the minute, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is beginning to set up some early processes and look for submissions, etc. There will be a very active call for contributions. At these times, the BBC seeks to engage the wider public in a debate and, through bodies like this Committee, in that process. We intend to do that. I think that you will see a more normal, elongated process where that discussion leads up to the decisions about what happens from 2016 on.

The Chairperson: The other aspect that I want to talk to you about is local programming and the commissioning of that. Are we on target to deliver on local programming for Northern Ireland?

Mr Johnston: You will recall that our ultimate target is 3% of total network TV spend by 2016. That is where we need to get to. We started from a very low base, as you know, of less than 0.5%. The figures have been up and down. In 2012, we had a below average figure of 1.3%, but the forecast for this year is 2.1%, which is on target or slightly ahead, perhaps. If you unpick that, then, the truth is that this is a story of good progress, but also more progress to be made. That is what I would describe it as. The drama story is a very good one, and the reason why 2013 has been a very good rich year is because we had 'The Fall' and 'Line of Duty' in this period, which have helped enormously. Current affairs is well on track and at a good stage of maturity, and you will see journalists like Darragh

MacIntyre, Declan Lawn and Mandy McAuley more often on 'Panorama', for example, as well as 'Spotlight' and other programmes in the mix.

The independent supply has been very up and down, and that is what has caused some of the tensions for some companies. Some companies have had some very good periods of success with a wide range of programmes, and then it has been up and down a bit. That has been exacerbated by the financial challenges of the BBC and the impact of the delivering quality first (DQF) savings across the UK. Recently, though, the BBC Trust has recognised that as an issue in Scotland and Northern Ireland and done a special study in the past six months to look at what we can do to enable the local independent companies in Scotland and Northern Ireland to take a more stable and better approach. It has introduced some initiatives that include some support initiatives to try to make that work better and more sustainably. That is something that we are working on right now, and that I am getting more involved in.

We are also working with Northern Ireland Screen to see whether we can agree a formal structure of aligning our support mechanisms more effectively to enable the companies to build and to keep progress going. On the one hand, a local independent filmmaker, Alison Millar, won a BAFTA this year, so we have great success and talent there. However, making sure that that leads to a sustainable and regular suite of business has been a challenge that we are seeking to address

The Chairperson: You said that you are working with Scotland in relation to the independent companies. Does that mean that there is going to be an issue for Northern Ireland independent companies competing against Scottish companies?

Mr Johnston: Of course, the truth is that all our independent companies have always competed against other companies, including all the big independent companies in London. There is no actual quota. I noticed that, in the way the question was asked, that there was an implication that there was a quota per se for Northern Ireland. There is a planning target of 3% across all the genres, including drama and children's.

Some companies understand the dynamic of the initiative that you referred to and others are less sure. We are going to monitor it very closely to see whether it works. The idea is that we are ring-fencing a set of opportunities in a wider range of genres and in bigger up-sums or bigger scales, rather than the very micromanaged planning approach that was being undertaken and that was not working. Part of the dilemma, and what we are saying, is that the model that we deployed was not working well enough, and most of the independent companies would agree with that. This is an attempt to free that up. To make it really work and to enable companies to compete, we need to underpin that with support mechanisms, and we are in the process of doing that.

The Chairperson: Will ring-fencing a set of opportunities mean that there will be a better opportunity for Northern Ireland companies to compete more?

Mr Johnston: Essentially. To give you a good, tangible example of what it means, because of the really rather narrow way it was previously managed — for a whole set of reasons, which I am not saying were the right reasons — some of the genres where we have the most strength, like documentaries, were very difficult for us to break into as it was not in the microplanned approach. What this does is free up wider opportunities in, for example, documentaries, where we have a number of companies that I think are very strong, to enable them to have more of an opportunity.

It is still incredibly competitive, as it should be and will always be. This is a commissioning process in which people have to make decisions based on quality, ideas, the audience and all that. However, I want to work hard with other colleagues in network BBC to underpin that and to help to deliver success. We will monitor it closely and see whether it begins to come through.

We have seen some recent commissions for the network. One of the local companies recently got a commission, and we had the controller of BBC2 here. Another company has been put into funded development for some series. We are beginning to see some outworking of that. We will watch it and try to make sure that it works.

The Chairperson: Obviously, we have not yet met our target for local commissioning. How are the other regions scoring?

Mr Johnston: Like us, Scotland has been up and down a bit, but, more recently, it has been above target. As I said, in our most recent year, 2013, we are just above the target that was set for that period.

In our independent sector, outside of drama, that is a more challenging part of the overall plan, based on our scale and all of that. On the flip side, I would argue that, in drama, we have made as much if not more progress than any other part of the UK, and have benefited from 'Game of Thrones' and the Northern Ireland Screen investment and all that. You can see how success leads to a momentum. It is a mixed picture in that regard.

Ms McCorley: Thanks for the presentation.

The Chair referred to the debate earlier this week, and the Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF) and the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund were part of that debate. The Irish Language Broadcast Fund has delivered very successfully, and people who were trained up as a result of that continue to be productively employed and are working extensively in the sector. I am not too sure what arose from the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund; I just do not have that detail.

As I said, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund has been very successful, but it is not mainstreamed, which means that the people who work in that sector and rely on it are always waiting to see whether they will get funding. We have had two periods of funding. Do you think that it should be mainstreamed to provide stability and allow the sector — both sectors — to grow, develop and flourish?

Mr Johnston: Can I clarify what you mean by mainstreamed? I think that our version of mainstreamed might be a bit different.

Ms McCorley: For instance, the first phase of funding came to an end and there was a flurry of political activity to try to get it extended. It looks like the same thing will happen at the end of this period of funding. It is not good for the people who work in those sectors, who feel that there may not be another extension.

Mr Johnston: I would say a number of things about that. First, from our point of view, I agree that the Irish Language Broadcast Fund has been very successful; there has been a very rich mix of programming. Of course, we are absolutely keen to see that funding and support continue as smoothly as possible. That is our objective. However, having said that, how you do that gets into the business of how you structure these things, which, as I said, is for others to decide.

The model that you described is still pertinent to everything that we do. The time frames might be slightly out of sync, but actually the licence fee settlement period that we are about to approach will be yet another one of those instability moments that you are describing for everything that we do and across all that we do. That is what happens in the way that we operate. Periodically, a full review is undertaken and there is a redefinition of how much investment is placed on what, in totality and across the piece. That experience is not unique to those companies in that context; it is something that happens. Even in the BBC's financial planning cycles, there can be three-year plans that can create instability. So, those things have to be dealt with anyway. They will not fully resolve that.

I appreciate the point that you are making. We are absolutely supportive of the fund and its success, and would be very keen to see it continue.

Ms McCorley: Yes, but it does not depend on the BBC's budget.

Mr Johnston: I appreciate that.

Ms McCorley: It actually depends on whether there is a commitment at governmental level. That is the difficulty.

Do you think that it is fair that £113 per person is spent on the Scottish Gallic language, whereas £17 or £19 per person is spent on the Irish language? Does that seem fair?

Mr Johnston: I want to say a few things about that. When I was last here, we talked about that. Some of the much larger provision in Wales and Scotland is based on historical funding and

approaches and all of that. We looked at the balance of needs within the budget that we had, which included any additional resources that were brought to bear by the ILBF, and tried to balance that out. So one of my challenges is about whether it is fair. Obviously, we are always keen to increase content across the piece as best we can, as long as there is audience demand for it. What I have had to do — because we have a more constrained total pot for language, as you say, compared to elsewhere — is balance the needs of English-language genres and output against that. It is a more challenging model, you are right, so I do think it is fair based on that total set funding.

It is very hard to tell what the right level of provision is. It is all developed through historical means. You have to take into consideration that we have now got to a position where once a week on BBC2, pretty much, we have an Irish-language programme. If you look at the audience analysis, that feels in kilter with the wide range of other things that have to be covered on those channels. I would say that that is the case. The other factor in play for audiences who are interested in Irish-language programming is TG4's presence as well, which is obviously a substantial set of output. We try to work in partnership with TG4 as much as possible to make more of the sum of the parts, if you like. What is the fair balance? In totality, is the level of provision in Wales right or in Scotland? It is quite hard to judge. It depends on the views of the wider political institutions and, ultimately, the public. It is not really for me to dictate that. We provide what we can with the funds that are made available to us.

Ms McCorley: Yes, but there is such a huge gap between the funding levels.

Mr Johnston: I appreciate that.

Ms McCorley: You also have to bear in mind that the UK Government have committed themselves to supporting the regional or minority languages under their remit. The Irish language is one of those, as are Ulster Scots, Scots Gaelic and Welsh, but there is a huge disparity, so the UK Government obviously do make distinctions in their commitment —

Mr Johnston: If you see it through the lens that I have to bring to bear, I also have to balance all of those undoubted needs that we are delivering against sport, politics, comedy, drama, English-language factual, documentary, all of those things, and trying to get the right portfolio balance for the audience needs across the piece. I know that one of the debates that have gone on in Wales is about whether the balance is too far the other way. Is there not enough English-language programming versus the provision in Welsh? It would be wrong for me to make those kinds of calculations. That is a much wider public and political debate, as you rightly say. I am trying to give you a sense of the sort of practical balances that we have to bring to bear in deciding what we do.

Ms McCorley: Is there not a case for you to make a bid for a greater budget on that basis? You are saying that you balance all of the different sectors that you have to provide for. Given that the Welsh can make a huge provision for the Welsh language, and the Scottish, should you not be saying that there is a case here?

Mr Johnston: I have made, and do make, a case for an increase in our local spend, which includes Irish language and Ulster Scots, as well as the other things that I have referred to. The challenge is making those cases. We definitely have audience needs that are very demonstrable. There is good feedback about the appetites for a range of those programmes. Obviously, the realities are the financial ones. The BBC budget has been on a 20% downward trend, if you like. We have not even been hit as much as that. It has been more like 15%. So it has been quite hard to get reinvestment, but I will still continue to make that case in budget meetings. That helps to increase the provision across all that we do.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning, Peter. From the point of view of your policy on broadcasting the Irish language, why is it that, for example, given the fact that Irish is spoken in the Chamber during the course of debates, it never features in 'Stormont Today'?

Mr Johnston: I think it has, when we cover footage from the Assembly Floor, if Irish has been used. Obviously we are doing a big summary. Clearly, all of it is provided on 'Democracy Live' and through other means. There is no policy decision there. What you are talking about is that they decide — admittedly, in a short space of time, given the length of debates that have happened — what to make use of in the programme. I am certain that Irish is used when it is used, but it will be in a very abridged version.

Mr D Bradley: You must have better hearing than I have, because I cannot recall hearing any Irish during those programmes. Maybe it is something that you could check up on.

Mr Johnston: I will check. I am sure that I have, but I will certainly check.

Mr D Bradley: It is something that I have noticed, and I wanted to ask you about it.

Mr Johnston: The job of 'Stormont Today' is to faithfully cover, in a very short space of time, what happened that day and to prioritise that. So that should dictate it, not anything else.

Mr D Bradley: I understand that all right, but if Irish is used in the Chamber, I would have thought that that should be reflected to some extent in the reports.

From the point of view of network productions, you say that we have 43 hours and £12 million.

Mr Johnston: In the current year.

Mr D Bradley: How does that compare with other regions?

Mr Johnston: The best way to look at it is what we are on a path towards: when we get to full provision in Northern Ireland, it will be between £20 million and £25 million; something of that order. That will equate to 3% of total network TV spend. The equivalents in Scotland and Wales are dictated by population size. So, in Scotland, when you factor in the population increase, it is about, I think, 9% of total spend. So, I think that it is 3%, 9% and about 5% or so in Wales, which add up to, if I have got my sums right, 17% in totality. The point is that it goes through twists and turns. Some places will have more spend than others relative to the population proportions, but the intention of the BBC is to plan it through in order to have a fair spread based on population size. That is what the plan is about.

Mr D Bradley: So you are happy that we are getting our fair share?

Mr Johnston: If you take the 2013 figure of 2.1%, you see that that is absolutely in line. I could easily use that figure and just say that everything is fine. What I am trying to say is that there is still work to be done. The trust recognises that there is more work to be done with the indie, non-drama stuff in Scotland and Northern Ireland. So we are trying to work on that at the moment to get it through to the 2016 target that we need to meet. At the same time, as I say, we have good delivery and success on drama, which is probably ahead of target.

Mr D Bradley: And you have planned to do that.

Mr Johnston: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: I want to ask you about the savings/cuts; whatever you want to call them. You have already done £4.88 million, and you still have roughly £3.02 million to do. You have made 34 voluntary redundancies. How are you going to achieve that further £3.02 million?

Mr Johnston: The good news from the point of view of protecting posts is that — we have obviously gone beyond the mid-point — luckily enough for us and our plan, quite a lot of the plans that were in place for the latter years were for savings that the BBC is making centrally that we just benefit from. So, they do not have any real impact on us, but they impact elsewhere, and we will benefit from that. That is worth at least £1 million. We also have, attached to that, a number of assumptions about saving money or, to be honest, stopping wasting money on the maintenance of property and those kinds of things. We have a property project that relates to that, and that is being prioritised by the BBC. We are currently in discussion with the finance director about whether that property project can come forward and deliver some savings on things such as maintenance of buildings and all that stuff, and technology, or whether those savings are tied to that, so they move in the process. We are in a debate about that at the minute.

The truth is that we have had the most difficult period of post impacts. According to the current plan — I always have to reinforce that, because with the licence fee settlements to come and all that, you never know how things will change — I envisage that we should have a pretty modest level of savings through normal means of post closures or whatever; much less than that. In fact, when I saw you the

last time, I thought that we might end up with 50 to 70 post closures at the end of the plan. I think that, based on current assumptions, it will probably be reasonably below the 50 mark in the end. As I say, I am just telling you the honest truth of where we are currently at. It is still in debate, but it is looking more positive.

Mr D Bradley: So, roughly, there could be another 16 —

Mr Johnston: To be honest, it is more likely to be less than that. I am just guessing to give you a sense of what the sums tell me, as they currently are. Around more like 10 or something, I would say, is the sort of amount that we would have to make currently. As I say, that is always subject to any planned BBC changes or whatever.

Mr D Bradley: In section 5 of your paper, "Looking Ahead", you mention that there is a need for expenditure of £20 million in capital expenditure over the next four years. Is that in Belfast?

Mr Johnston: That is right. Well, actually, no; that includes Belfast and Radio Foyle.

Mr D Bradley: What type of works will that involve?

Mr Johnston: You are talking about replacing broadcast systems; replacing things like the news trucks, or SNGs as they are called, which go out and about to cover stories; and improving the physical infrastructure of the building in various ways, including the wiring of the building, to move content around. It is those kinds of things.

Mr D Bradley: That is grand. Thanks.

Mr Humphrey: Thanks very much for your presentation, Peter. You will be aware that we are now in the decade of centenaries. Next year will be the first of the four centenary years of the Great War. Obviously, in what was then Ulster, there were the implications of the Great War, with all the political stuff at the back of that. Can you expand on what BBC Northern Ireland plans to do around that?

Mr Johnston: First, some of you may have — I do not know whether any members came along, but some years back, to lead into this period, we had a major history conference at which we brought a lot of academics and broadcasters together with our producers and local companies to talk about the entire decade of events that were then in prospect. We have done a lot of advance thinking about this, and that means that there are pretty advanced plans in place across a wide range of the historical anniversaries.

Obviously, we started this period, crudely, with William Crawley's Ulster covenant documentary. We have at least four or five commissions for television across a wide range of themes that relate to the First World War. The BBC is prioritising that incredibly significantly, and the director general is chairing a steering committee, which I am a member of. Several hundred wide-ranging projects are already in play.

The Irish-language team, just to mention it again, has a documentary about the experiences of Irish-language speakers in the First World War. We also have the straightforward experiences of people from here who fought in the First World War through a project by DoubleBand — a war photographer who took photographs of people from here who fought in World War I.

We are looking specifically at the Somme, and also, obviously, the political events around the Easter rising. We have a diverse range. We also have a project in train, which is being made out of Belfast, about the experiences of what were called the "Teenage Tommies". There is also a project about the experiences of women in the First World War. There is a very rich mix of programmes being put together.

Backing that up, people tend to focus on the television stuff, and there is a lot of it, I have to say. There will be a lot for those of you who are interested in World War I. For those of you who are less so, there will be a lot bombarding you as well. The good thing about it is that there has been a very intentional approach to make it a very diverse range of themes and experiences across all of that, including all the normal and obvious stories that you would expect. However, there is also a supporting set of projects on radio and online. Here, we are doing about 100 personal stories from World War I with different aspects of impact, from soldiers to people left behind and all of that. We will

collate those into a portal that will tell all those stories across the piece, and it will go out on radio as well.

Mr Humphrey: When you talk about hundreds of projects, are you talking about hundreds of projects that are Northern Ireland-based?

Mr Johnston: When I mention the hundreds of projects, there are two hundreds there, if you like. There are the hundreds of television projects that we have across the piece. Television is expensive, as you know. At the moment, as far as I can remember, there are at least four or five major TV projects that we are doing, but there are also network ones with relevance here. There is also the hundred stories that we are telling, which will be broadcast on radio and online. There is a good mix, but obviously the audience will judge that in the end.

Mr Humphrey: You know that, sometimes in life, perception and reality are poles apart. Sometimes, they are right next door to each other, with a thin line between them. There is a perception nationally and, perhaps, locally as well that the BBC is left-leaning. What are you doing to address that?

Mr Johnston: I have heard that perception debated centrally in London. It is not an issue that we tend to get locally. We tend to get more comment on other divisions, let us say. You have just put your finger on the problem: there is a perception. That is a second cousin of the problem that we faced here for decades: being impartial and being seen to be impartial across the old divisions. It is really important to our journalism that we are and are seen to be impartial.

You are right that there are, sometimes, perceptions. Often, the left-leaning perception is portrayed by politicians or the press in the UK. We measure and monitor such perceptions through audience reaction. We tend to find a broad appreciation of the BBC's impartiality. That is the truth. There can be peaks and troughs, and, sometimes, people getting things wrong can cause difficulties, which we have to work to alleviate. I deal with other issues of impartiality, but that is not one that I face regularly.

Mr Humphrey: How do you monitor it?

Mr Johnston: We have major surveys that continually monitor the quality of and reactions to programmes. We have a series of means by which we get feedback, including representations from politicians — some in this room have been to see me at times — other opinion-forming groups and others. We have a daily call log, which registers people phoning in to complain, compliment or whatever, and can be entertaining at times. Over the years, we have become more adept at monitoring public attitudes more regularly and using that to inform what we do.

Mr Humphrey: The BBC is based, by and large, in Broadcasting House and Blackstaff House.

Mr Johnston: Yes, and in the Foyle office.

Mr Humphrey: As a Belfast representative, my question is on the city centre. Does the BBC plan to move to the Titanic Quarter?

Mr Johnston: I am oft asked that by my journalists during staff sessions. I spoke about the £20 million that we need for capital and property investment. We did a lot of work to get on to the pan-BBC priority list as a capital and property project. The £20 million needed is a substantial amount for the BBC. A study of our needs fleshed out what we need, and, as part of that, we did a first pass survey of the sort of sites that might be suitable should moving be the best option. A lot of the sums suggest that one of the most efficient ways to fix everything would be to move.

There were close to 20 possible sites around Belfast city centre. If and when we get the go-ahead to consider a move, we would go into an open process of tender, which would consider a range of site location options. Off the top of my head, having seen some of the emerging analysis, I know that there are at least five possibilities. Everyone seems to obsess about the Titanic Quarter, partly because the studios are there, which is another factor. No law says that the BBC cannot try to use those studios as well, which is, potentially, good. We would be looking for a central, neutral and accessible site. We have always benefited from a good location, as I hope that you all agree. Our colleagues in Scotland and Wales have always had more peripheral locations. We have a good,

central location, and we want to maintain that. We have not yet made a decision, but, when we do, it will be fair and objective.

Mr Humphrey: I suppose that people come to that conclusion because of the budgetary constraints and economies of scale that you will have to look at, as the corporation has had to do across the nation. It was decided to close Television Centre and expand Broadcasting House, and then came the Salford operation. BBC Scotland decided to relocate to the Clyde. So it is natural for people to think that the BBC might well move to one consolidated, purpose-built site.

Mr Johnston: Absolutely, and I am not saying that the Titanic Quarter is not a viable site. Of course it is. I am saying that there is a perception that we are moving. We decided that there will be an objective process to select from a range of site options. Current development means that we are lucky to have a more interesting range of site options than might be the case elsewhere. Recently, we had a presentation from the city council on the range of development in the city.

Mr B McCrea: Peter, when you cover the Shankill bombing, Greysteel massacre and Maze escape within a week, does that have any impact on the overall fabric of society?

Mr Johnston: That is a very difficult subject. It is a real chicken-and-egg scenario. I have heard views on this from all sorts of angles, and it is interesting. Let us take a step back from the news, which tends to be dictated by events, politics and so on. Some people tell us not to include any programmes on the past in our documentary output because that is bad for us all. Others say that we absolutely need to tell those stories and not pretend that they did not happen. We have shown some very challenging programmes recently, the most recent of which is 'The Disappeared'.

Our approach has always been to seek to respond to what we believe the audience's interests and needs are and to provide a range of programmes. So, on the one hand, we want to provide a voice and a platform for victims and others to discuss those, admittedly, vexed and difficult issues. We try to do that in the most balanced, sensible and sensitive way that we can. To be fair, I would argue — I think that colleagues elsewhere certainly feel that this is the case — that, for obvious reasons in Northern Ireland, we have been good, in the main, at being able to tell difficult stories in a sensitive way. They are of public interest. It would be wrong if we dwelt purely on that and did not also cover the range of life happening more widely. The 'True North' strand is partly about counterbalancing that.

Mr B McCrea: I will keep you on that point and put a proposition to you. You can either agree or disagree with it. Nobody is arguing about balance or sensitivity. If we continue to relive every atrocity or act of barbarism that happened in the past — there are a lot of anniversaries coming up — my assertion is that that will have an impact on society today. It is not just about dealing with it in isolation; there is a responsibility. I found it interesting that you referred to "audience's needs". I wonder who decides what those needs are. Do you understand what I mean? I am not talking about balance or sensitivity. My contention is that, if we continue to relive these events, we will have problems in the future.

Mr Johnston: We get direct feedback on this, and I strongly believe that many victims of the Troubles who have participated in our programmes of that nature are, normally, appreciative of being able to have their stories heard. That is what we tend to find. I think that we play a very important and positive role. We are not at some crazy place where every single event has to be covered, but we are dealing with a unique and significant period that warranted discussion. We tend to find that, with many of our programmes — the more interactive ones, for example — the audience tells us directly whether they are engaged and whether people want and need to talk about these subjects.

Mr B McCrea: There is an interesting negative here, is there not? There is an audience that is directly engaged, and, of course, victims are a very important part of that. However, a significant section of the population might not be directly engaged. How do you deal with something that does not happen?

Mr Johnston: Often, when listening to or watching these programmes and documentaries, the most powerful element is the way in which others engage in the stories. I have heard that on air many times. I understand your point. However, as I said to the Committee before, I fundamentally believe, and all the research tells me, that we have a very sophisticated audience that can judge for itself. Of course, some people will see that a documentary on a Troubles-related story is on and not watch it. That is fine, as long as we balance it with other things.

Mr B McCrea: I am talking about editorial control in the overall mix, not individual programming. How does the decision-making process work at the macro level?

Mr Johnston: Topical or news-based programmes have editors etc who are there to judge that. On interactive phone-in shows, a large part of the agenda is driven by what people phone in to talk about and want to talk about. You can almost see that and measure it live. At the same time, you are right that we rely on the judgment of our editors across the piece in news and current affairs, for example.

Mr B McCrea: It cannot be led by just phone-ins, can it? You have a responsibility to provide strategic leadership to the community.

Mr Johnston: Ultimately, in every part of the BBC's news and current affairs, we employ editors. They are very experienced people who have to judge the priority of stories.

Mr B McCrea: That is for individual programmes, but what about the cumulative effect?

Mr Johnston: The cumulative effect is judged. Our editors report through a layer of people who have a wider overview, and it is for them to judge that. As I said, we also do research regularly to try to monitor and measure how our output is coming across, what the balance is and what people feel about it.

I attend the BBC board of management in London every week. We also have access to the information presented to the board on the stories that most consume people, the stories that most interest people, the stories that least interest people, what people want to know more about and what they want to know less about. We do it in quite a scientific way. Is it a perfect science? No, of course not, particularly here, given the emotional and emotive range of issues that we can, do and should cover.

Mr B McCrea: You could use sensationalism, could you not? That would get good audience figures. People are interested, and the subject matter is very emotional. Whether that is the right thing —

Mr Johnston: Honestly, my experience is that, if you set out to be purely sensationalist — dumbing down is a second cousin of this — and are unduly cynical, what tends to happen is that you have a one-off hit, but the audience will quite quickly tire of it. We are in a place, for good and ill, where some very important and difficult subjects are much viewed, much more so than they would be across the rest of the UK. In the main, we have tended to find a pretty reasoned response because they are difficult issues.

Mr B McCrea: Moving the argument on a wee bit, I will take up your comment about being "unduly cynical". Do you agree with the First Minister that the media, of which the BBC is a large part, are often negative and portray a particularly poor impression of Stormont and the Executive?

Mr Johnston: One thing that has changed in my tenure, having moved from head of programmes to this job, is that there is relatively less discussion about bias across the divide and more about whether we are being more positive or negative. The business community, for example, often asks us whether we are covering the broad range of more positive stories. There is a very straightforward reason for the question, of course, and I hear it asked quite a lot.

It is not our job to be unduly positive or unduly negative. What tends to happen, of course, is that the news agenda dictates the news. If you think about it, news events or news, almost by definition, will often have a negative basis. That has especially been the case more recently because of the economic times that we have been through and their effect on business. That said, more recently, with developments on the economic front, I have seen lots of stories from our business team highlighting growth and success.

Our job is not to try to be positive or negative but to try to reflect the realities. If those realities are negative because the subject matters are negative, it is our job to showcase that and not to pretend that they are otherwise.

Mr B McCrea: Let me quote the First Minister:

"As First Minister, it frustrates me to hear some commentators and politicians take every chance they get to talk Northern Ireland down. To listen to them, you would think that nothing good had happened over the last five years or that devolution had not made a difference to ordinary people's lives. And because that diet of defeatism is all that people hear about the Executive and politics, it is hardly surprising that they are cynical about Stormont."

You talked in your opening statement about the importance of news and content. The First Minister alleges that you, as the primary news provider, are being cynical and talking down the achievements of the Executive.

Mr Johnston: From that quote, I picked up on, "all that people hear". The news service is a very important part of what we do and will often include challenging content, particularly for people in authority, including the BBC. The BBC management has been on the receiving end as well, rightly, of course. We try to provide a wide range of other content — that is the importance of a diverse BBC. 'Proms in the Park', with the Titanic building in the background, was broadcast across the UK and was a fantastic example of very positive, celebratory programming. We have also done that very well with the City of Culture year.

Mr B McCrea: Is that not a two-track approach, Peter?

Mr Johnston: No, because we have to do them in separate ways.

Mr B McCrea: My final point is that we are in a very challenging political environment. The people need to have confidence in the political and democratic processes. One of the major ways of communicating with the people is through the BBC. The First Minister suggests, and he will have support from certain other sectors, that the unrelenting diet of negativity is having an impact on our ability to build a better future.

Mr Johnston: I want to be clear on this: I do not believe that we have an unrelenting diet of negativity. I understand why some people, particularly those who, like you, are in positions of authority, will feel that. However, our job is to scrutinise and analyse the news output. That is what the BBC is there for. People have different philosophical approaches. I work for the BBC, so I believe in the impartiality of scrutiny through journalism. That is an important part of what we do. We should also reflect other aspects of life. I find that people tend to focus on the negative and will not have seen or heard the other content. However, I definitely do not think that it would be right for our journalists not to ask questions: that is what the BBC is there for. It is for political representatives to be able to answer those questions and convince the audience. It is not for us to do that.

Mr Hilditch: There has been some good debate and argument, but we have not even got to presenters' salaries or anything like that yet. *[Laughter.]* The iconic picture of 'Proms in the Park' was, of course, Carrickfergus Castle.

Mr Johnston: Yes, indeed. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hilditch: I want to turn to sport. I suppose that you know what is coming: local soccer. At grass roots, the feeling is that soccer is hard done by these days when it comes to coverage of the local game. How can we take that forward? Is it a dead duck?

Mr Johnston: No, I do not think so. I have heard that said, and I understand it. I will start from the top. Unlike Scotland or Wales, where one sport is very dominant, our challenge is to try to create programming across a range of sports. We do provide a wide range of coverage of local soccer, but people tend to think about live television coverage and compare soccer with rugby or Gaelic, for which we have live rights.

Over the years, we have tried to work with the football authorities to develop the process. You have probably seen our online magazine, which is an attempt to begin to address that. There is probably still more that we can do, and we are still in regular dialogue to see whether we can build on that. Much of this comes down to live rights. For many years, we were lucky enough to have the live rights to Northern Ireland's football internationals. As you know, Sky came in and spent a lot of money to pick those up.

Mr Hilditch: You have only highlights at the moment, is that right?

Mr Johnston: Yes, at the moment. We do not know yet how the latest deal will work out, but we might have trouble even getting highlights in the next period. We do not know for sure what that will mean. What tends to happen, in football particularly, is that these are major deals done at international level.

We counterbalance that with other sports. We are in discussion with a number of sports. We have just renegotiated our rights to show the North West 200 for another four or five years, which is the event that we have had the longest run on. We are in discussion with the GAA and Ulster Rugby. We try, in our broader sport output, to ensure that football has an important and regular place. I appreciate that sports fans are passionate about their sport, and, whatever we do, it is never enough. Undoubtedly, there is always an appetite for more. That is where we are at, and I hope that we can build on some of the initiatives that we have taken recently.

Mr Hilditch: The door is still open.

Mr Johnston: It is; it is not always down to resources and so on.

Mr Hilditch: On a positive point, I looked at figures that show that, 20 years ago, 46% of TV and broadcasting was by the BBC. Twenty years later, with much more competition, the BBC is still at 42%. That is a success story.

Mr Johnston: That is important. There is a popular theory, a bit like the perception of bias, that, somehow, we are this huge, dominant force. We are, of course, very significant, and that is an important part of what we do. The competition has grown enormously, with Sky and other channels, so we provide a smaller proportion these days.

Mr McGimpsey: Very briefly, Peter, may I ask you about the recent turmoil at the BBC, with director generals, chairs of the board and so on coming and going? To what extent have the controversies that surrounded the BBC as a national broadcaster affected you in Belfast?

Mr Johnston: From regular staff surveys, we know that staff in the BBC have an enormous level of pride in the organisation and the job that it does. Their very high level of natural pride is knocked by these scandals and problems. Consequently, all staff in the BBC, many of whom have given large parts of their lives or the majority of their careers to it, have, undoubtedly, been shocked, saddened and angered. I have heard that directly from staff in sessions.

We have tended to be on the periphery. Much of what happened was at the centre of the BBC, and the various individual stories have not really affected us here. We were not part of the digital media initiative (DMI) project, and the other issues happened in and around London. The pay-offs, for example, did not affect anyone here. To a degree, we have been removed from that, but any BBC staff member will tell you that we are all hopeful now. Tony Hall was quick to come here after getting the job, and he was very good with the staff. He started his career as a trainee in Belfast in the 1970s, which went down well with many of our staff. His job now and what he is really focused on is trying to draw a line under all that has happened and sort out the problems. As you know, he has been taking action on related issues. He is trying to move the BBC on and concentrate on the important job of output and the Charter review process.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, Peter. I will sum up what other members have said about the BBC standing accused of a number of biases, including language, sport and politics. I hope that, maybe, you will leave with that in mind. That is the perception, regardless of political outlook, across the board.

Mr Johnston: I want to make it clear that I was trying to say that we do take perceptions of bias and so on seriously. I understand that perception can be driven by events. We have a range of measures that assess the view of the general public.

Mr Ó hOisín: It is a run with the fox and hunt with the hounds situation. You say that the devolution of broadcasting powers is not a political issue; yet, on occasions, you seem to engage very overtly in the whole political discussion. That was more a comment than anything else.

I want to touch on the City of Culture year. Its biggest event was Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. I picked up anecdotally and locally that people were disappointed with the BBC's coverage, given that half a million people were there over the week. You might note that 30,000 people were at Radio 1's Big

Weekend. It got huge coverage, probably rightly so, but there is a perception that there was too little coverage of the fleadh.

Mr Johnston: It is interesting. I received a few letters making that point. One reason for that is, I think, the city's appetite for more and more coverage of its wide range of events. So I then studied specifically what we had done and found, by any measure, a wide range of coverage across radio and television.

Part of the difficulty is that people tend to focus on television promotion. Other events, such as Radio 1's Big Weekend, are very focused. It is a single event, whereas Fleadh Cheoil covers a range. For the fleadh, we chose an Irish language TV series. On Monday night, BBC 1 will broadcast a documentary, the making of which involved following Fleadh Cheoil behind the scenes and examining its significance. Part of the difficulty is that, because of the nature of the event, we chose an all-encompassing TV documentary as the best way to showcase it.

That said, when I looked in detail, I found a lot of coverage on radio and television through other means, in news and radio, particularly Radio Foyle, of course. Could we have done more and can we do more? You always can and you always could. As I said, we have done 50 projects across the year, which I think is significant. There was a rich mix, including the fleadh. There is always more that we can do, but I hope that we have provided a good range of programming.

Mr Ó hOisín: I do not hold with the theory that an event being covered by TG4 or RTÉ takes away from the fact that the BBC should —

Mr Johnston: Ultimately, we are trying to prioritise scarce resource. Therefore, as long as an event is getting a full television outing, we sometimes make that judgement — not always, but I think that it should be a factor sometimes.

Mr Ó hOisín: I have another question, which is a local one. Has there been any policy change on using what 99% of the people who live there use as the title of the city of Derry? In the past year — maybe it has to do with the City of Culture — the double moniker seems to have been used a lot, rather than one or the other.

Mr Johnston: We still apply the same policy. The phrase Derry/Londonderry has been used more often because it relates to the official title dictated by the organisers. Our network colleagues got into quite a tangle as well and sought advice at times, but we have not changed the policy at all.

Mr Ó hOisín: The usage has changed.

Mr Johnston: It is such a hard thing to control completely. After the City of Culture year, I will reinforce what our approach is

The Chairperson: May I leave you with another perception? You seem to have lost a number of senior females from sport, current affairs and production. Is there a gender issue in the BBC?

Mr Johnston: No. We have been through a voluntary redundancy programme. Sometimes, when that happens, people at certain life stages tend to be interested in availing themselves of the opportunity. The others that did so were older men, but that did not seem to cause much interest in the press. Recently, I was at the leaving do of somebody who had worked for the BBC for 42 years and 100 days and was one of our iconic older audio guys. There was a small cluster of such cases.

We still have a very rich and diverse mix of female presenters of that age. Recent changes have brought in a new range of female presenters, and we are developing more. Gender has been a bigger issue for the BBC as a whole, and there has been a focus on it. Here, with Donna and Tara on television and Wendy on radio, we have probably had a richer mix of females across our stations than many other places, but we should keep an eye on that.

If somebody is judged to be appropriate for voluntary redundancy, it would be wrong to refuse them on the grounds of gender or age. However, it is important to ensure that we have a healthy balance. When we go through phases of change, we look at how we have ended up and whether there is anything that we need to do to remain balanced. I do not think that there is a bigger problem. Rather,

the voluntary redundancy programme was one of those times when a number of factors came together.

The Chairperson: Some of the familiar faces that we saw on the BBC have gone to your competition.

Mr Johnston: Some of them have come to us as well, of course, and we have a few ex-UTV female presenters on our channels now.

The Chairperson: As we said at the beginning, we are moving towards the charter, and the Committee would like to have some sort of input into that, if possible. It would be useful if we could keep in correspondence about that.

Mr Johnston: The charter is very important and appropriate, and I encourage your officials to look at it. I believe that I am right in saying that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is setting up a first-stage consultation process quite soon and, as I understand it, is calling for submissions. There will be a number of means into that. There will be both BBC-managed input and BBC Trust-managed input, but there will also be input from the UK Government.

The Chairperson: The Committee has a visit to London next week, and we plan to meet DCMS during the visit. Thank you very much.

Mr Johnston: Thank you.